



MARICOPA COUNTY
Environmental Services
1001 N. Central Ave.
Phoenix, AZ 85004
www.maricopa.gov/envsvc

September 12, 2001

Contacts: Laura Devany, PIO, Environ. Services: (602) 506-6611 / Pager: (602) 420-7874
Doug Hauth, PIO, Public Health: (602) 506-4926 / Pager: (602) 205-3002

COUNTY ADVISES PUBLIC TO COOK RAW OYSTERS BEFORE EATING ***Health Department Links Foodborne Illness to Harmful Bacteria in Raw Oysters***

(Phoenix)— The Maricopa County Environmental Services and Public Health Departments have linked a case of foodborne illness to raw oysters containing the potentially life threatening bacteria *Vibrio vulnificus* and advise consumers to cook their oysters before consuming them.

This is the fifth reported case of illness in Maricopa County from *Vibrio vulnificus* since 1998; two resulting in death and all cases linked to eating raw oysters. The latest case is still hospitalized in critical condition.

“Eating raw oysters is risky for more people than you might think,” said David Ludwig, Environmental Health Division Manager. “People with certain conditions are at risk for serious illness or even death if they eat raw oysters and are better off avoiding them all together,” Ludwig said.

The five reported cases of illness, including the fatal two, involved people with chronic illnesses that affected their immune systems. These high-risk conditions can include:

- Liver disease, either from excessive alcohol use, cirrhosis, viral hepatitis, or other long-term infection;
- Blood iron disorders;
- Diabetes;
- Stomach problems that lower acidity (including use of antacids prior to eating);
- Cancer-caused immune disorders such as chemotherapy;
- HIV (Human Immune deficiency Virus);
- Long-term steroid use, such as for asthma or arthritis;
- Very young children and the elderly.

Symptoms of the illness can appear within a few hours to several days after eating. Most common symptoms include:

- High fever;
- Nausea;
- Abdominal pain;
- Diarrhea.

-more-

Though *Vibrio vulnificus* is present in oysters year-round, it grows at a much faster rate in warm water temperatures at this time of year. Only thorough cooking can eliminate this dangerous bacterium and those in high-risk groups should avoid eating uncooked shellfish. This includes oysters prepared as ceviche.

As of October 3, 2001, new State and County food safety codes will be in effect, requiring all food establishments to post public warning notices wherever raw shellfish is sold or served.

Consumers should consult with their physician if they develop any symptoms and report any food-related health complaints to the Citizen's Environmental Complaint Line at **(602) 506-6616** or on-line at **www.maricopa.gov/envsvc/complaint.asp**.

For more information about foodborne illness, go to www.foodsafety.gov or www.cdc.gov, or call the CDC at 1-800-311-3435.